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The Private Perot Behind the Image

BY BILL WALLACE

As this year's presidential race continues, is it increasingly clear that Ross Perot's ostensibly independent Reform Party ticket will be headed by the party's founder — despite his expressions of diffidence about running.

According to Gerald Posner, author of "Citizen Perot," an investigative biography of the quirky billionaire, the gap between Perot's public pronouncements and his private actions in this regard should come as no surprise: Since Perot came to public prominence as a computer-services merchant in the late 1950s, Posner writes, his entire career has been characterized by a discontinuity between public and private personas.

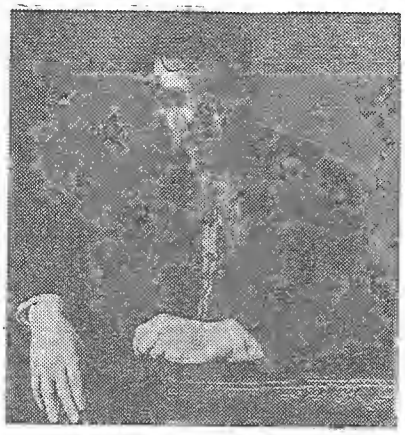
Posner, who is best-known for his controversial 1993 book on the Kennedy assassination, "Case Closed," has created a skillful reconstruction of Perot's life, drawing on a wide-ranging variety of documentary materials and interviews, including a two-day session with Perot himself, followed by numerous reinterviews during a six-month period.

Perot Deconstructed

Although Posner's book is being touted for its revelations about Perot, most of the material has been fairly well-established in press accounts and other biographical treatments.

What makes "Citizen Perot" of particular value to those attempting to assess the Texas computer tycoon as a presidential candidate is the way the book deconstructs Perot's carefully cultivated image.

For example, while Perot has portrayed himself as a self-made man who clawed his way to the top through hard work and initiative, Posner marshals evidence that Perot actually made his mark in



'Citizen Perot' author Gerald Posner

BOOKS

CITIZEN PEROT
His Life and Times
By Gerald Posner
Random House; 400 pages; $25

business through a series of questionable deals, insider trading, conflicts of interest and unfair competitive practices.

According to Posner, Perot's business, Electronic Data Systems, grew quickly by monopolizing the administration of Medicare claims when that industry was just beginning to emerge in the 1960s.

Posner notes that Perot first became involved in the political sphere when he donated money and employees' services to the Nixon campaign in 1968. Despite Perot's carefully crafted image of self-reliance, and his frequent railings against governmental favors for special interest groups, Perot used his White House connections to try to salvage a million-dollar-a-year Medicare contract in California and to intercede with the Army Corps of Engineers in a dispute about a piece of federal land he was leasing in Texas.

Rescuing Employees

Part of Perot's tough-guy persona is based on a 1978 incident in which he arranged for the rescue of two EDS employees who were arrested by Iranian officials in Tehran. The rescue effort was later publicized in a book by novelist Ken Follett, "On Wings of Eagles."

Posner writes that Follett was selected as the book's author after Robin Moore, Perot's first choice, began asking too many embarrassing questions about the rescue effort. In the years since the rescue, Perot has made a variety of public statements about the effort, many of which, Posner writes, are at variance with the facts.

"Citizen Perot" is a portrait of a man obsessed by power, with a narrow and paranoid view of the world in which everyone who is not his ally is his opponent. Posner says author Follett says he has heard the tycoon turned presidential candidate say, "If I could run for king, I would do it."

"Unfortunately for Perot," Posner concludes, "reaching for the presidency will have to suffice."

Bill Wallace is on the staff of The Chronicle.